

# Baker Street *Elementary*

PRESENTS  
"THE LIFE AND TIMES IN VICTORIAN LONDON"



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THE LIFE AND TIMES IN VICTORIAN LONDON  
# 076 -- WHERE DID YOU GET THAT DRESS -- VICTORIAN FASHION --  
FEBRUARY, 2022



WELCOME TO TOPIC # 076... TODAY HOLMES AND I  
WILL BE LOOKING AT THE FASHION DURING THE  
VICTORIAN PERIOD.



**CLOTHING IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND, ESPECIALLY WOMEN'S DRESS, SERVED AS ONE OF THE MAJOR INDICATORS OF CLASS AND STATUS.**



**WATSON OFTEN INCLUDED A DESCRIPTION OF THE CLOTHING WORN BY A VISITOR TO 221B FOR JUST THIS SORT OF DESIGNATION... WERE THE CLOTHES FRAYED? DUSTY? LINED WITH SILK? SEEDY?**





**EVEN WITHOUT HOLMES' ABILITY TO DEDUCE ANY NUMBER OF CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY FROM A PERSON'S DRESS THE CASUAL READER WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO LEARN MUCH FROM WATSON'S DESCRIPTION BECAUSE PERHAPS, AS IN NO OTHER ERA, DID 'CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN.'**



WHILE MEN'S FASHIONS CHANGED LITTLE DURING THE 19TH CENTURY, WOMEN'S CLOTHING PASSED THROUGH A NUMBER OF TRANSFORMATIONS...  
MENSWEAR BECAME MORE BUSINESS-LIKE, FAVORING DARK, PLAIN COLORS FOR THOSE IN THE MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES.



**TROUSERS, WHITE SHIRTS, AND A DARK COAT  
(NO CHECKS OR STRIPES) WERE CONSIDERED  
ACCEPTABLE APPAREL... LABORERS FAVORED  
HEAVIER FABRICS, SHORTER JACKETS, AND  
CLOTH CAPS.**





**ON THE OTHER HAND, WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS PROMOTED CHANGES THAT REQUIRED WOMEN TO PURCHASE NEW CLOTHES FOR EACH SEASON TO REMAIN FASHIONABLE... THIS EMPHASIS ON ALTERATIONS IN WOMEN'S FASHIONS ORIGINATED AFTER THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND A SHIFT IN GENDER ROLES.**





**WOMEN WERE TO DISPLAY 'CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION, CONSPICUOUS LEISURE, AND CONSPICUOUS WASTE' AS EVIDENCE OF THEIR HUSBAND'S FINANCIAL STANDING.**





**ONE MAGAZINE SUGGESTED THE MINIMUM WARDROBE FOR WOMEN SHOULD INCLUDE 'A WALKING DRESS A COUNTRY DRESS, A CARRIAGE OR VISITING DRESS, AN ORDINARY EVENING DRESS, A DINNER DRESS, AND A BALL DRESS.'**





**OF COURSE, ONLY A FEW COULD ACTUALLY AFFORD SUCH FREQUENT WARDROBE CHANGES, AND THOSE WITH LOWER INCOMES FUELED A THRIVING BUSINESS IN SECOND-HAND CLOTHING.**



FOR THOSE BELOW AN ANNUAL INCOME OF £50 (A LITTLE OVER £6000 IN 2020 FIGURES) THE PURCHASE OF 'NEW' ITEMS WERE THOSE THAT HAD BEEN DISCARDED BY THE UPPER CLASSES ONCE THEY SHOWED WEAR, OR WERE REPLACED WITH THE LATEST STYLE.



WHEN A DRESS WAS NO LONGER IN FASHION, A LADY WOULD PASS IT ON TO HER MAID, WHO MIGHT REMAKE IT OR PASS IT ON TO ANOTHER SERVANT FOR THE 'RAGBAG.' EITHER WAY, MANY MADE IT INTO THE SECOND-HAND CLOTHING TRADE.





**SUCH PURCHASES ALLOWED THOSE WITH LOWER INCOMES TO MAINTAIN A 'RESPECTABLE APPEARANCE' ABOVE THEIR ECONOMIC LEVEL... INTERESTINGLY, CLOTHING WAS THE ITEM MOST OFTEN STOLEN DURING THE VICTORIAN PERIOD.**



**SEAMSTRESSES WOULD SELL THE ITEMS THEY HAD BEEN PAID TO ALTER, OR LAUNDRESSES THOSE THEY WERE TO WASH.**





IN ADDITION TO SECOND-HAND CLOTHING, SOME PURCHASES WERE MADE AT 'SLOP-SHOPS,' WHERE CHEAP, READY-MADE CLOTHES WERE SOLD.



THE TERM 'SLOP' REFERRED TO READY-MADE  
BREECHES WORN BY SAILORS BUT BECAME  
ASSOCIATED WITH ANY 'OFF THE RACK' ITEM.



**WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE BAND-SAW TO CUT MULTIPLE GARMENT PIECES AT THE SAME TIME THE READY-TO-WEAR CLOTHING INDUSTRY BEGAN TO AFFECT THE INCOME OF SKILLED DRESSMAKERS.**



*MANUFACTURERS OF SUCH MASS-PRODUCED ITEMS  
WOULD HIRE WOMEN TO STITCH TOGETHER  
GARMENTS FOR PIECE-RATE WAGES.*



THESE SWEAT-SHOP WORKERS OFTEN LABORED 14-18 HOURS A DAY IN THEIR HOMES FOR BELOW-SUBSISTENCE EARNINGS... MOST OF THESE ITEMS WERE SHIPPED TO THE US TO SUPPLY IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS THERE. THESE WERE OFTEN ILL-FITTING, BUT SERVICEABLE.





IN ADDITION TO SEAMSTRESSES, OTHERS INVOLVED IN THE CLOTHING TRADE WERE 'COBBLERS, TAILORS, DRESSMAKERS..., MILLINERS, MANTUA MAKERS, HATTERS, IMPORTERS, SHOP GIRLS, WEAVERS, DYERS, AND TEXTILE WORKERS.'



ALTOGETHER, THIS INDUSTRY WAS THE SECOND LARGEST EMPLOYER OF WOMEN IN ENGLAND (THE FIRST BEING DOMESTIC SERVICE).



**IN PART, BECAUSE THE WORK WAS CONSIDERED  
'RESPECTABLE' AS IT OFTEN INVOLVED  
NEEDLEWORK — A SKILL CONSIDERED WITHIN A  
WOMAN'S SPHERE.**





DURING HIS EFFORTS TO SOLVE 'THE ADVENTURE OF SILVER BLAZE,' HOLMES FINDS A BOND STREET MILLINER'S BILL FOR MORE THAN THIRTY-SEVEN POUNDS A RATHER HEFTY SUM AND NOT SOMETHING THAT A SERVANT — OR HORSE TRAINER — COULD AFFORD.



**A VISIT TO THE DRESS AND HAT MAKER  
CONFIRMED THE IDENTITY OF THE PURCHASER  
AND A SECOND WOMAN IN STRAKER'S LIFE.**





IF ONLY SHE'D BEEN LESS INCLINED TO KEEPING UP WITH FASHIONS, STRAKER MIGHT HAVE BEEN SPARED HIS LIFE... IN THIS CASE, SHERLOCK UNCOVERED THE ANSWER TO 'WHERE DID YOU GET THAT DRESS?'



SO, WE HAVE COMPLETED TOPIC # 076 IN OUR SERIES...

IN TOPIC # 077, WE WILL BE LOOKING AT VISITING OR CALLING CARDS DURING  
THE VICTORIAN PERIOD.



## ORIGINAL SOURCE MATERIAL FOR THIS TOPIC:

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"THE LIFE AND TIMES IN VICTORIAN LONDON"

IS CREATED THROUGH THE INGENUITY & HARD WORK OF:

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